

Three possible conspiracies

WASHINGTON — Congressional hearings have left a chilling question hanging over the John F. Kennedy assassination. Was a second gunman lurking behind a grassy knoll at the murder scene in Dallas?

Using a sophisticated computer to analyze the sounds during the shooting, acousticians have identified not three but four gunshots. The extra gunshot has been traced by the computer to the infamous grassy knoll. If these scientific calculations are correct, who was the second gunman?

Investigators for the House Assassinations Committee have been digging through their files for clues. They have discounted the thin, if tantalizing, theory that the Soviet KGB or the American CIA plotted to kill Kennedy.

This leaves the investigators with three possible conspiracies that they haven't closed out: (1) that Mafia mobsters gunned down Kennedy out of revenge; (2) that the CIA plot to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro backfired, provoking Castro to retaliate against Kennedy; (3) that anti-Castro Cubans murdered Kennedy and tried to pin the blame on Castro.

Privately, the investigators believe the Mafia plot is the most intriguing of the conspiracy theories. They have pieced together circumstantial evidence that two notorious Mafia godfathers, Carlos Marcello and Santos Trafficante, may have been involved.

But the investigators acknowledge that they have no hard evidence to back up their suspicions. Both mobsters have denied under oath any knowledge of the Kennedy killing. The investigators will be cautious, therefore, in setting down their findings.

They will lay out a series of actions and associations which, of themselves, may be innocent but, taken together, form a suspicious pattern. The pattern will show that Marcello and Trafficante had tenuous ties to the two men directly implicated in the violent events of November, 1963 — Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby. Together, they had the "motivation, means and opportunity" to murder Kennedy, said one investigator.

The committee sleuths cannot show that the Mafia high command ever issued an order to knock off the late president, but they don't discount the

possibility that Mafia hoods, acting alone or in a small group, may have arranged the murder.

Here are some key pieces of the assassination puzzle, which the investigators are trying to fit together:

— Several witnesses testified behind closed doors that they saw Oswald in the company of David Ferrie during the summer of 1963. The late Ferrie has been identified as a pilot and investigator for Marcello. The Louisiana crime boss swore that he and Ferrie were together at the federal courthouse in New Orleans at the time of the Kennedy assassination. But this merely intrigued investigators. They noted that crime lords usually arrange an airtight alibi when they know in advance of a crime.

— A Cuban informant named Jose Aleman told investigators that Trafficante had told him in advance that President Kennedy "would be hit." The transcript of the confidential interview quotes Aleman as saying that "Santos Trafficante made clear that he was not guessing about the killing. Rather, he was giving the impression that he knew Kennedy was going to be killed." At public hearings, Aleman tried to back off this statement, but the investigators believe he was intimidated.

— Investigators point out that the mob wanted to get the late president's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, off their backs. The late, embittered Teamsters boss, Jimmy Hoffa, is known to have threatened in 1962 to arrange for an assassin to shoot Robert Kennedy as he rode in an open car. Committee sources note that Hoffa had close ties to Marcello and that Dallas was known in the underworld as "Marcello country."

— During the three months before the assassination, Jack Ruby made phone calls to shadowy figures who were close to Hoffa or Marcello. These included Hoffa associates Lenny Patrick and Robert Baker, also Marcello aide Nofio Pecora. Some of the people reached by Ruby had weak or changing explanations, investigators say. They got the tipoff from Dan Moldea's "The Hoffa Wars."

— The late Mafia mobster Johnny Roselli, who was recruited by the CIA to knock off Castro, suggested to us that

Castro had captured the underworld assassins and had turned them against Kennedy. Roselli also implied that Ruby had murdered Oswald to keep him from talking about his mob contacts. An FBI report reveals that Roselli told the same story, in more precise details, to his attorney, Edward P. Morgan.

— Roselli's operations against Castro were cleared through Trafficante, who controlled the Havana underworld. Police believe that Roselli was executed, gangland-style, for talking about underworld involvement in the Kennedy killing.

— Committee agents have established that in 1959 Ruby made three trips to Cuba and that he developed a relationship with Trafficante.

— The investigators are satisfied that Oswald made at least three visits to the Cuban embassy in Mexico City a few weeks before the assassination. Two witnesses, plus a "sensitive source," overheard Oswald discuss assassination inside the embassy.

It should be emphasized again that the available evidence is inconclusive and that both Marcello and Trafficante have vigorously denied the implications of the circumstantial events. The committee is also expected to be circumspect in laying out the conspiracy theories.